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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000350

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SL

SUBJECT: CHINESE AMBASSADOR WENJU'S TENURE IN SIERRA LEONE
ENDS

REF: A. STATE 41697
 1B. FREETOWN 153
 1C. FREETOWN 147
 1D. FREETOWN 208

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4b/d

11. (U) Please see the following update pursuant to reftel A:

12. (C) SUMMARY: Departing Chinese Ambassador to Sierra Leone Cheng Wenju paid Ambassador Perry a courtesy call on June 24 to bid farewell and summarize his time in Sierra Leone. At a July 8 farewell reception, Ambassador Wenju and Sierra Leonean Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFA) Zainab Bangura outlined the positive relationship between Sierra Leone and China. China's long-term strategy of building bilateral relationships through high profile contributions continues, though such contributions fail to provide significant capacity-building or development opportunities for Sierra Leone. END SUMMARY.

COURTESY CALL ON AMBASSADOR PERRY

13. (C) On June 24, Chinese Ambassador Cheng Wenju visited the embassy for a farewell courtesy call and to solicit input from Ambassador Perry as he compiled a summary report of his tenure in Sierra Leone. He remarked that the current local government election cycle was far more calm than the 2007 presidential and parliamentary cycle. Ambassador Perry responded that the success of the 2007 cycle, particularly the peaceful transition after the runoff, combined with President Koroma's mission statement before Parliament, were positive developments for the advancement of democracy in Sierra Leone. Ambassador Perry offered insight on the role that the U.S. Mission to Sierra Leone plays in advancing the freedom and democratic participation of women in the country's political and social arenas.

14. (C) Regarding long-term issues, Ambassador Perry referred to the stress of overpopulation on vital infrastructure in Freetown and the ongoing problem of youth unemployment. When Ambassador Perry inquired about the Chinese government's intentions to engage in infrastructure development, Ambassador Wenju referenced high profile construction projects (reftel B) that now include a road improvement project between Bo and Kenema. Agriculture continues to be a focus of Chinese assistance in Sierra Leone (reftel C). Ambassador Wenju stated that seventeen Chinese experts and technicians operate programs on rice cultivation and may advance to projects that provide farm implements. The current Chinese focus is limited to Freetown and Bo. (NOTE: In previous discussions, Ambassador has raised continued concern over human rights violations in China and the PRC's limited training of Sierra Leoneans when building infrastructure. This generates dependency on further Chinese assistance for

maintaining what was donated and the development of new initiatives. END NOTE)

15. (C) Ambassador Wenju departed Freetown on July 11 and his successor awaits confirmation. The unnamed, prospective Ambassador to Sierra Leone from China served in New York, Washington, and Europe. Ambassador Wenju expected the earliest arrival date for his successor to be in mid- to late August. Ambassador Wenju seemed to hold his potential successor in high regard but shared a laugh with Ambassador Perry in mentioning that Sierra Leone would be his first experience in the developing world. Ambassador Wenju is en route as Ambassador to Latvia after stopping in the PRC. The U.S. and Chinese missions to Sierra Leone maintain cordial, yet limited, diplomatic relations in line with previous reporting (reftel D). The agricultural sector, employment, and overall infrastructure improvement remain common focal points for both countries in Sierra Leone.

A FITTING FAREWELL RECEPTION

16. (U) On July 8, MFA Zainab Bangura hosted a farewell reception for Ambassador Wenju. Minister Bangura praised Ambassador Wenju as a friend of Sierra Leone and encouraged continued support for Sierra Leone. Minister Bangura listed the rehabilitation of structures at the State House, Parliament, Bo Stadium, and residence of the Vice President as major contributions made by China through Ambassador Wenju. Minister Bangura also emphasized the USD 4.5 million no-interest loan and the provision of undergraduate and

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graduate scholarships for students in Sierra Leone. On the broader political agenda, Minister Bangura restated Sierra Leone's commitment to a One-China Policy. Despite these positive statements, however, it must be noted that a negative perception of the Chinese among many Sierra Leoneans remains an issue for the Chinese Mission (reftel D). The media reflects public suspicion that the Chinese and their enterprises operating in Sierra Leone benefit the most from the assistance provided under the auspices of "development."

17. (U) During his speech, Ambassador Wenju reiterated the positive sentiments on the expansion of Sierra Leonean democracy and the development potential of the country shared during his visit with Ambassador Perry. He applauded the administration of President Koroma for taking major steps to fulfill campaign promises to fight corruption and to provide energy. Ambassador Wenju referenced the ongoing struggles of developing the agricultural sector and unemployment as major issues for Sierra Leone. He reassured those in attendance that China would continue to be a development partner to the Government of Sierra Leone, and that his successor will work to reinforce a stable society and establish a more robust economy.

COMMENT

18. (C) Sierra Leone and China share overall amicable bilateral relations but the perception that Chinese interests disproportionately yield the benefits of their development assistance persists. High profile initiatives, such as the high-dollar no-interest loan and construction projects in Freetown and Bo appear to prioritize immediate popular coverage within the country. The short-term, highly visible nature of such assistance is not matched by capacity-building that allows Sierra Leoneans to sustain such projects in the long-term without continued Chinese assistance. Whether this represents a flaw or strategic design in the architecture of Chinese development projects is currently unclear in Sierra Leone. END COMMENT.

PERRY